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A Frozen Leap participant dives into Ford Lake on Saturday.

Lake leapers raise more than \$20K

BY LISA CAROLIN
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Wind-chill temperatures in the teens and snow flurries did not discourage dozens of die-hards from jumping into Ford Lake on Saturday morning. From the Eastern Michigan University nurses' team to the Ice Ice Baby team, scores of brave souls took the icy plunge into Ford Lake.

The fifth annual Ford Lake Frozen Leap will benefit SOS Community Services, and the goal this year of raising \$20,000 has been surpassed.

"This is our biggest year yet, and we may even hit \$25,000," said Bilal Saeed, co-founder of Pakmode Media + Marketing, which created the Frozen Leap along with Lake Shore Apartments' staff for the purpose of better engaging youth in the community.

Mike Hart, former star University of Michigan running back and current Eastern Michigan University running back coach, agreed to jump in wearing shorts and a T-shirt if \$20,000 was raised.

"It was cold, but fun!" said Hart, who said he was both excited and nervous, and likened it to his feelings before a football game. "I respect the cause (SOS Community Services). Up to the age of 14, I moved two or three times a year and remember the stress it put on my mother. I can only imagine how families who are truly homeless feel."

Participating for the first time was the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department and its team of 18 staff members. The team name is the Polar Pigs, which can be construed as the slang term for police or an acronym for "Pride, Integrity and Guts."

"I asked a few deputies if they wanted to take part and, before you knew it, I had staff asking if they could join the team," said Derrick Jackson, director of community engagement for the Sheriff's Department. "It's good for the community to see us giving back and to see us beyond the badge."

Jackson said he felt more secure jumping in Saturday morning knowing the Sheriff's Department dive team was on



The Noodles & Co. team listens to announcements Saturday. Below, Richmond resident Abby Shaw from the Freezing Dead team jumps into Ford Lake.

hand in case of an emergency. Also standing by were the Ypsilanti Fire Department and the Washtenaw County Hazmat Response Team.

"It feels like a brief but complete shock to the system, and like there's millions of tiny needles poking you all over," said Joel Diaz, who took the plunge for the third year in a row. "Call me crazy, but I'm actually at the point where I look forward to it every year."

Diaz's team this year is the aptly named Soggy Bottom Boys, inspired by the singing group in the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou?"

Teammate Steven Linville was having a tough time getting warm, even after he took a warm shower and was dressed following his leap.

"It was exhilarating and shocking," he said. "My body froze up when I hit the water, but I made it out of the lake without needing help," he said, referring to the two members of the Washtenaw County dive team who were submerged in the lake wearing wet suits.

Both the Lake Shore Apartments and Pakmode had teams participating Saturday.

Saeed and Pakmode co-founder Tim Adkins were among the lake leapers on their team, the Frozen Pandas. Employee Chelsea Acho also took the brisk bound into the lake.

"Events like this don't



happen too often and, on a normal day, you don't have any reason to jump into the lake in the middle of winter," said Acho, Pakmode's assistant general manager of sports marketing. "This gives you the opportunity to have fun with friends, meet new people and raise money for a local charity all in one."

SOS Community Services was invited to be the beneficiary of the Frozen Leap last year as well and used the money to support programs and services it offers, including crisis services, emergency food and temporary housing programs.

"SOS' food pantry served 7,571 people in 2012 and housed about 60 families, including 100 children," said Chelsea Brown, community relations

coordinator at SOS. "The Frozen Leap event is a reflection of how much of an impact can be made when a community comes together."

Diaz said he loves being able to help SOS Community Services and participating in an event that takes place in Washtenaw County.

He said Pakmode does a lot to make Ypsilanti, his hometown, a better place.

As far as convincing others to join the Frozen Leap next year, Diaz said, "It's definitely something that should be on everyone's bucket list. The moment you get out of the water, you feel more awake than ever before, just full of energy and excitement, and (you have) this feeling of accomplishment that only doing something crazy can provide."